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HEADLINE: Powell Met With Top Lebanese Officials Today Before Going to Meet With Syrian Leaders

GUESTS: Nasser Al-Kidwa, Dore Gold

BYLINE: Paula Zahn, Brent Sadler, Wolf Blitzer

HIGHLIGHT:

Secretary of State Colin Powell met with top Lebanese officials today before going to Damascus for meetings with Syrian leaders. Powell is shuffling to try to stop attacks by Hezbollah guerrillas from the Lebanese side of the border with Israel.

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PAULA ZAHN, CNN ANCHOR: Up front though this morning, at this hour, Secretary of State Colin Powell met with top Lebanese officials today before going to Damascus for meetings with Syrian leaders. Powell is shuffling to try to stop attacks by Hezbollah guerrillas from the Lebanese side of the border with Israel, attacks, which could become a second front in the already volatile Middle East conflict. Brent Sadler in standing by in Beirut with the very latest on the Powell mission. Good morning, Brent.

BRENT SADLER, CNN CORRESPONDENT: Good morning, Paula. Well U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell is now in Damascus on the second leg of this day of really moving away from the central problem of Israel/Palestinian conflict and looking at it like at another military quidmar (ph), the one you just referred to there Paula along the Lebanese/Israeli border.

Let me give you some background of the past couple of weeks. Hezbollah guerrillas have been bombarding Israeli troops, which occupy a parcel of land called the Sheba (ph) Farms at the foot of the Golan Heights.

Now over this past two weeks, Israel has been responding with heavy artillery and warplanes against the suspected Hezbollah guerrilla hideout. So Secretary Powell has come to Beirut. He met a few hours ago with the Lebanese President Amil Lahood (ph) to stress the importance from the U.S. perspective that all parties interested in peace should do their utmost to reign in Hezbollah attacks and what he heard here in the Lebanese capital was perhaps, as far as the U.S. mission is concerned, something of a shock because the Lebanese say they will not attempt to reign in Hezbollah because Hezbollah they say is fighting a legitimate resistance operation against those Israeli occupation troops on Arab territories. That's a big problem. It's a sentiment. It's a position, a policy, if you like, that will be echoed right now to Secretary Powell in the Syrian capital Damascus by the Syrian President Beshal Alasat (ph).

However, despite that very firm position here, Secretary Powell is still hopeful that he will be able to make some progress in not only the Lebanese/Israeli situation but Middle East peace in general in this very now crisis-torn region. And this is what Secretary Powell had to say earlier today after meeting Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiki Lerey (ph), who incidentally will be meeting U.S. President George Bush in Washington Wednesday. This is what Powell had to say about the mission his boss, President George Bush, sent to this region to undertake.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

COLIN POWELL, U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE: I know that he will say to you that he is committed to finding a political solution to bring peace to this region. That is why he sent me here, to talk about ending terror and violence but with a clear understanding that in and of itself won't be enough. Just as you said, all the ceasefires in the world will not solve the problem until there is a political solution and that is our commitment and we will devote all of our energies to it.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

SADLER: For his part, Lebanese Prime Minister Lerey said "security is important, very important, but it cannot be a replacement for a peace agreement in the Middle East." So now, Secretary of State Colin Powell in Damascus forging ahead with what he says is an aggressive restart of the political process to try and achieve the vision of peace to make that vision of peace a reality in this very disturbed region. Back to you Paula.

ZAHN: All right. Thanks Brent. Brent Sadler reporting from Beirut, Lebanon for us this morning.

We're going to turn our attention back to the Middle East now for Secretary of State Colin

Powell on his shuttle diplomacy mission to Beirut and Damascus. The major challenge remains, getting Israel and the Palestinians back on the path to peace. Powell met over the weekend with both Palestinian Leader Yasser Arafat and the Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. And Sharon yesterday called for a regional peace conference but one that excluded Arafat. Let's get the very latest now from Wolf Blitzer who is standing by live in Jerusalem. Good morning, Wolf.

WOLF BLITZER, CNN CORRESPONDENT: Good morning, Paula. That regional peace conference would be - would include the United States, it would be chaired by the United States under this Israeli proposal. It would include moderate Arab states like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco. It would include, according to the Israeli plan, representatives of the Palestinians but not according to the Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and would not include Yasser Arafat, which, of course, makes that proposal null and void as far as the Palestinians are concerned. There's no doubt, as far as they're concerned, Yasser Arafat is there leader despite the fact that he remains besieged in Ramallah in that compound in Ramallah where he once had rather elaborate headquarters compound.

All of this is taking place in this backdrop of this continuing Israeli military assault that - that's been going on in the West Bank for about two weeks.

First let's take a look at what's been happening in Jenin. In Jenin, at that Palestinian refugee camp there, the Israelis are now allowing some international observers, members of the Red Cross, the International Committee from the Red Cross, as well as from the U.N., some international journalist to go in. A huge dispute, as you well know, between the Israelis and the Palestinians. The Palestinians are accusing the Israeli army of engaging in massacre in Jenin. Hundreds of Palestinians they say were killed. The Israeli flatly deny it. They say, yes, there were extensive casualties but perhaps 100 Palestinians but they also point that there was fierce fighting and some 23 Israeli soldiers were killed as well. That disputes has not obviously been resolved by any means whatsoever. And the propaganda war on both sides is intensifying.

In Bethlehem, which is not far from here in Jerusalem, there was some explosions earlier today near Manger Square and the Church of the Nativity where for some two weeks some 200 Palestinian gunmen were holed up in that church. The Israelis say they blew up what they call a bomb workshops that they discovered, laboratories and those were planned detonation, those explosions we heard in Bethlehem earlier today -- Paula.

ZAHN: And Wolf, as I understand you'll be interviewing the prime minister of Israel a little bit later on today, 1:45 Eastern Time, and that will unfold live on CNN, right?

BLITZER: It - we'll have it live here on CNN at around 1:45. I'll be going over to the prime minister's residence for this interview. And we'll try to get some answers on some the important issues of the day. He doesn't give a lot of interviews so I'm looking forward to asking him some good questions during this one.

ZAHN: And we will look forward to hearing his answers and the question. Thanks, Wolf. See you probably before 1:45, but we, of course will be carrying that live when Wolf conducts that interview.

Joining us now to talk more about Powell's peace mission, Nasser Al-Kidwa, Palestinian

Permanent Observer to the U.N. Welcome back to American Morning.

NASSER AL-KIDWA, PALESTINIAN PERMANENT OBSERVER: Thank you.

ZAHN: You know doubt have heard the debate going on in America now, as Yasser Arafat essentially told Colin Powell over the weekend that we're not going to talk about any kind of ceasefire until the Israelis pull out of the occupied territories. Do you understand that if that were to unfold that way, there are a lot of people that would think America would be rewarding terrorism?

AL-KIDWA: First of all it's not only Yasser Arafat who is demanding that. Actually President Bush demanded precisely that more than 10 years ago, 10 days ago, I'm sorry. The Security Council of the United Nations have opted two resolutions demanding also the withdrawal of Israeli forces, one of them says without delay. So obviously, the Israeli side is defying the United States and also violating Security Council resolutions. Without this fundamental step, it wouldn't be possible for the Palestinian side to do anything.

You have to remember that the Palestinian cities are under brutal Israeli occupation. Israel has committed war crimes, there is no doubt about that, as there are preliminary (ph) reports about a massacre in Jenin, and by the way, with the dead in the hundreds or the dozens that does not change the fundamental fact that a massacre did take place in Jenin and so on.

ZAHN: All right.

AL-KIDWA: So there is no possibility to do anything without first achieving full withdrawal.

ZAHN: But Ambassador Al-Kidwa, would you acknowledge that there is a distinct difference between the Israelis saying they're going in to uproot terror and define leaders of a terror network and these suicide bombers, which some people have taken to calling homicide bombers, who intentionally destroy innocent victims?

AL-KIDWA: Well, listen. Let me be very clear. We are against any loss of civilian life on both sides and that, of course, means the Israeli side. But if you are talking about the moral equivalence, I think that what the Israelis are doing is much worse in one sense because what they are doing is being done by the Israeli army, the official army of the state, while what is being done by some Palestinian is being done by groups outside the law. That is the major difference. Israel subjected more than 1 million Palestinians to horrendous situation, all kinds of atrocities.

ZAHN: All right. But are you saying, sir, then Israel has no right to ever defend itself under any circumstances?

AL-KIDWA: No. I'm not saying that. I am saying there is a difference - huge difference between defending itself and attacking the whole population and committing all kinds of atrocities and violation of the (INAUDIBLE) convention (ph) to the point of committing war crimes. This is something very serious, which should be faced by the international community, attended to and frankly the international community has to take very serious actions in this regard.

ZAHN: All right. I just need a real quick 10-second answer to this one. What is one thing that both sides could compromise on that might move this process forward? Name one thing the Palestinians could do, as quickly as you can because we've got to move on to you Israeli counterpart.

AL-KIDWA: (INAUDIBLE) implementation of Security Council resolution 1402.

ZAHN: All right. Well you did it even quicker than 10 seconds. Ambassador Al-Kidwa, it's good to have you on American Morning. Thank you for your perspective. We're going to turn now to one of Ariel Sharon's Foreign Policy Advisors, Former Israeli Ambassador to the U.N., Dore Gold who joins us now. Welcome back to you as Mr. Gold.

DORE GOLD, ISRAEL FOREIGN POLICY: Thank you, Paula.

ZAHN: All right. Well let's talk a little bit about this demand that Yasser Arafat is making in addition to the President of the United States that the Israelis withdraw immediately. It was made abundantly clear after Colin Powell meet with Ariel Sharon over the weekend no timetable has been set for that withdrawal. Has Ariel Sharon called America's bluff here?

GOLD: This has nothing to do with a test of wills or chicken or the egg, who goes first. This is a question of Israeli lives. Israel, in fact, already pulled back from several Palestinian cities; substantial cities and we paid a price. The attack in Agawa (ph) Junction in Haifa last week came from Tulkaram (ph), a city of which we pulled out of without having a ceasefire. We just had an attack in Jerusalem that all of you saw on Friday on Jaffa Street, that attack came from Hebron - from Hebron where we have not conducted these military operations yet.

So if we do not complete these military operations or if we withdraw precipitously without a ceasefire, without a Palestinian partner who is taking responsibility for the situation on the ground, Israeli lives will be lost. It's that simple.

ZAHN: Let me ask you this. When you refer to Hebron, you said that you have not conducted military operations yet. Do you plan to go into Hebron anytime soon?

GOLD: The operational decisions of the Israeli army are, you know, a matter of discussion with the Israeli cabinet. I'm not speculating about what we're going to do but I am pointing out is there's specific areas in the West Bank, but especially in Gaza Strip where we have not conducted our operations to uproot terrorism for whatever reason. And we pay for a price for that because there is nobody on the Palestinian side who is serious about uprooting this terrorism.

Nasser Al-Kidwa speaks about U.N. Security Council resolutions. Well there is a U.N. Security Council resolution 1373, under Chapter 7 of the U.N. Charter. Those are binding resolutions of international law. That's a resolution, which states that no government, no state has a right to harbor international terrorist organizations. Well, Hamas, Islamic Jihad and now Mr. Arafat's own Al Aqsa martyr brigades are international terrorist organization. They are harbored. They are financed in the areas under Yasser Arafat's jurisdiction. We will not pay the price of his continuing failure of abiding by U.N. Security Council resolutions and his failure to uproot terrorism.

ZAHN: As the Israelis stay in place in some of the areas that you say need to be searched, do

you understand how there is growing friction between some sectors of the president's political pace here in America, some who feel that the president violated the Bush doctrine in allowing somebody to actually negotiate with Yasser Arafat. Has President Bush muddied the moral clarity of his war on terrorism by allowing Secretary Powell to directly talk with Yasser Arafat?

GOLD: Well first of all, President Bush is great friend of Israel and he's a man with great moral clarity. He is the one who said, either you're with us or you're against us. Israel is with the U.S. in its war on terrorism. For if we fail, and we won't fail, but if we did fail to defeat the suicide bombers, and if the suicide bombers and their supporters understood that you can bring a democratic society to its knees, suicide bombing will appear in Western Europe and will appear in the United States. We must win this ...

ZAHN: So are saying it's OK the American government has talked with Yasser Arafat and negotiated with him?

GOLD: Well the U.S. is in a very difficult position. It has regional interests. It has Saudis, Egyptians and others who are turning to the U.S. Department of State and asking for the U.S. to intervene. But we have presented to Secretary Powell indisputable evidence that Yasser Arafat himself has been funding these organizations. I'm talking about the Al Aqsa martyr brigade whose are responsible for the suicide bombing in Jerusalem bombing on Friday. We have the receipts. We have the invoices. And we even have letters approving payment to specific terrorist operatives signed in Yasser Arafat' handwriting. So what to you do with that? It's a very difficult situation. I'm glad that Secretary Powell is also focusing on the north, on Syria, Lebanon, and the threat that's emerging there because that's the real powder keg of the Middle East. We have Iranian forces now deployed on Lebanese soil with rockets aimed at Israel. That's the mine that we have to dismantle.

ZAHN: All right. Dore Gold, we're going to have to leave it there this morning, obviously, Mr. Sharon's policy advisor. Thanks for your time this morning.

GOLD: My pleasure. TO ORDER A VIDEO OF THIS TRANSCRIPT, PLEASE CALL 800-CNN-NEWS OR USE OUR SECURE ONLINE ORDER FORM LOCATED AT www.fdch.com

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